

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE
ASSISTANT-PRINCIPAL IN A LARGE URBAN
JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE
ASSISTANT-PRINCIPAL IN A LARGE URBAN
JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL**

By

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**An internship report submitted to the
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ABSTRACT

This internship examined the experiences encountered during a 10-week participant-observation of one junior high school assistant principal. During this period of time the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal in the Newfoundland context were explored. Other goals of the internship were to understand the factors that shape the assistant principal's role and how this role might develop in the future. The main purpose however was to gain an understanding of leadership from the assistant principal's perspective, which would help in the development of the requisite leadership skills.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the support and patience of my husband and family throughout my studies; without them this internship report could not have been completed.

I thank the assistant principal, staff and students of the junior high where I did this internship. They made me feel welcome and allowed me to be a part of their lives during this time.

I am especially indebted to Dr. Jerome Delaney for his encouragement and dedication throughout this endeavor

CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE INTERNSHIP

Rationale for Internship Option

The degree of Master of Education in Educational Leadership Studies at Memorial University requires the graduate student to complete a course of study that includes a theoretical grounding in current paradigms and a research component to take the form of thesis, internship, paper folio or project. My choice of the internship route reflected my belief that a theoretical foundation, while an essential component, does not furnish one with skills and behaviours necessary to effectively assume a leadership role. I was confident that the internship experience would provide ample opportunity for reflection and further elucidation of my philosophies of education and leadership while also providing interactions that aid in the development of the essential skills and behaviours requisite of an effective leader in an uncertain and turbulent educational climate.

I entered the educational system as a high school Science and Home Economics teacher in 1993. Since then, I have worked in both rural and urban schools and taught a variety of junior high and high school courses from Math to Literature and Canadian Democracy to Enterprise Education. I became interested in leadership as a result of a school improvement initiative that was introduced by the Bonavista-Trinity- Placentia Integrated School Board. This interest and my career aspirations guided me towards the graduate program in educational leadership.

The Internship Setting

The school chosen to be the setting for this internship is one of the largest junior high schools in the province with a population of approximately 665 students and 36 teachers. This school was chosen for a number of reasons. First, the assistant principal was suggested as a suitable internship site supervisor because he possessed extensive leadership experience and has worked throughout the province in both urban and rural schools. When approached he responded quite enthusiastically to the prospect of working with me in a mentoring capacity. Secondly, this school is a junior high school. This is the age group I am most interested in working with and the one with which I believe I can make the most difference. Thirdly, the large size and fast pace of the school would afford a wealth of opportunities for studying and documenting leadership in action.

University and Field Supervisors

Dr. Jerome Delaney and Dr. Bruce Sheppard from Memorial University agreed to co-supervise my progress throughout the internship portion of the Master of Education Program. Dr. Delaney is a sessional lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University and has many years of leadership and teaching experience at the secondary level. Dr. Sheppard is currently Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and Research in the Faculty of Education at Memorial and has researched and taught courses in Educational Leadership at Memorial for several years.

The field supervisor for this internship was the assistant principal of a large urban junior high school. This candidate was recommended as a potential field supervisor because he has a varied leadership background and therefore would be an admirable

mentor in the area of educational leadership. He has completed a Bachelor of Education, majoring in French, a Master of Education in Curriculum and a Diploma in School Resource Services. His background includes: six years teaching French in grades 4 to 12, eight years at the School Board level in the positions of French Learning Resources Program Specialist and Itinerant Teacher for Learning Resources. For the past three years he has worked in administration, one year as principal and two years as assistant principal. It was felt that he would bring to the internship a wealth of leadership experience from both the school and board perspectives.

Internship Goals and Objectives

The following were the goals and objectives I hoped to accomplish through the course of my internship period as a part of the administrative team:

1. Through participant observation, to gain insight into and engage in activities related to leadership in an educational organization;
2. To develop a mentoring relationship with the assistant principal, through which meaningful skill development and experiential learning could occur;
3. To reflect upon and clarify my philosophies of education and educational leadership;
4. To gain an in-depth understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal in this school;
5. To document the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal in this school;
6. To compare the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal at this particular school to those identified in the current research literature;

7. To attempt to answer the question, “ How is the junior high school assistant principal’s time spent? ”.

Means for Realization of Goals and Objectives

This list of goals and objectives was in no way exhaustive as I anticipated my being involved in many unforeseen activities, thus adding to the internship experience and hopefully facilitating their achievement. The following strategies were utilized in realizing the goals and objectives discussed above:

1. Journal writing: As a way of reflecting on my daily experiences to help me clarify my thoughts with regard to the assistant principal’s role in school culture. The journal entries served as a basis for discussion with the assistant principal as we examined questions and issues that arose. Feedback that was received during our discussions was also noted in my journal.
2. Various activities: To engage in activities consistent with the assistant principal’s duties in a large urban school. I accompanied the assistant principal as he moved through his day and, where possible, participated in the various duties he was involved in. Through these experiences I hoped to gain insight into the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal and to begin to develop the skills requisite for my becoming an effective assistant principal. Emphasis was on observation of time-tabling for the various specialists and specialty programs, maintenance of the school’s computer administration system, planning of staff meetings, informal evaluation of new staff members and observation of the implementation of the school discipline policy.
3. School meetings: To attend, where confidentiality allowed, meetings between the school administration and students and/or parents. I realized that such

meetings are often emotionally charged and my presence would be contingent on the approval of the student(s) and/or parent(s) involved. Through such meetings I hoped to discover how the administration dealt with conflict situations that arise during school–family interactions.

4. Staff-administrative interactions: To attend staff meetings and other staff administration interactions both formal and informal to gain a sense of the assistant principal's leadership role with the school's staff members. I hoped to learn how this assistant principal juggles the conflicting roles of leader and colleague.
5. School council: To attend meetings of the school council to gain insight into the administration's role in the school council process.
6. WinSchool computer program: To observe and participate in the installation and implementation of the WinSchool computer program that was in progress. This project is on going at the school and the assistant principal was eager to have me involved.
7. Teacher allocation and scheduling: To observe and participate in the planning for teacher allocation and scheduling for the next school year. This task was complicated by the then recent announcement of reorganization plans for the entire school district.
8. School board meetings: To attend any meetings at the school board office that apply to the duties of the assistant principal or principal.

The Research Component

The research methodology for this study was qualitative. The intent of the study was to explore the roles and responsibilities of an urban junior high school assistant principal. My objective was to gain an understanding of the assistant principal's contribution to the leadership of this school. Another related topic of study that arose during the course of the internship was the discovery that there are many sources of stress and frustration that assistant principals face as they perform their leadership role. It became apparent that these sources of stress and frustration undermined the effectiveness of the individual in this position. The research took the form of a case study whereby a daily anecdotal record was used to formulate an account of the assistant principal's professional life.

The Limitations of the Research Component

As this was a qualitative case study that focused on a single individual in a single school, findings are not presumed to precisely reflect conditions in any other school. However, generalizations can be made that may provide insight into the leadership experience of assistant principals in similar school settings and even to the assistant principalship as a whole. This researcher has attempted to minimize bias by comparing the findings in this localized situation to those reported in the leadership literature.

The limited time period afforded by this internship (approximately 14 weeks) was an additional source of bias as the researcher was only able to observe the administrative team at work for one term in the second half of the school year. This restricted the researcher to involvement in only those activities that typically occur during this time period. Excluded were the administrative duties involved with the beginning of the

school year; organizing timetables, working out the flaws, student registration, new teacher initiation and so on. A broader view of the assistant principal's role may have been gained given an extended observation time that encompassed the whole year's activities.

Organization of the Report

This report is organized into three chapters. Chapter one is an overview of the report and outlines the goals and objectives of the internship. Chapter two is the research component, which examines the evolution of the assistant principalship. This portion provides a historical overview of the position's development and attempts to provide a glimpse into the future of the assistant principal's position. Chapter three is a commentary reflecting the internship experience and the roles and responsibilities undertaken by one particular assistant principal as observed over the course of the internship period. Finally, recommendations will be made based on an analysis of the internship experience. Throughout this report assistant principal and vice – principal will be used interchangeably as different researchers use both to represent the same administrative position in the school system.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Research into the role of the assistant principal in educational administration is meager at best. Studies traditionally omit important aspects of the assistant principal's role in favor of focusing on the role of the principal (Panyanko & Rorie, 1987). It is apparent that the assistant principalship has been marginalized in the educational leadership literature. Frequently, this position is not accepted as a unique administrative post; instead, it is considered merely an extension of the principalship.

It is true that both principals and assistant principals fulfil many similar administrative responsibilities. Researchers however, have only recently begun to recognize that the organizational context in which these responsibilities are accomplished differs significantly for the two positions. Hartzell (1993) proposes three reasons for these differences in the leadership experience at upper and lower levels of the organizational hierarchy: (1) the individual's position in the administrative hierarchy; (2) the different responsibilities at each level of the hierarchy; and (3) the perception of the individual by subordinates. He asserts that these differences make the leadership experience unique at each level and further that it would be beneficial to the understanding of educational leadership if researchers explore the effects of these differences on administrative performance.

This paradigm shift in the way leadership at different levels of administration is viewed could potentially have an impact on the direction of leadership research, the

philosophy and curriculum of administrative preparatory programs and the process of career advancement within administration to name a few.

Another important development in the leadership literature has been the intermittent debate in the literature regarding the importance of isolating the specific duties of the assistant principal's position. As early as 1932, the need to delineate a role for the assistant principal was questioned. It was argued that, while the role should fall within specified limits, the precise duties should be dictated primarily by tradition (Ancell, 1988). Many others took the stance that it was essential to elucidate a role for the assistant principal if the methodical advancement of educational administration was to occur. Gillespie (1961) contended that the educational administration field had evolved beyond this and the assistant principal was now recognized as part of an administrative team. If so, according to Childress (1973), the definition of a discrete niche for the assistant principal was irrelevant.

Reform initiatives that have been recently proposed in Newfoundland place more responsibility for decision-making in the hands of the individual school and yet the specific roles for principal, assistant principal, staff and school council are unclear. It is suggested that each of these groups will be empowered to take on greater and more varied responsibilities, yet little guidance is given as to the way this empowerment will be operationalized. The role of the assistant principal is rapidly evolving; however, little effort has been spent discussing the direction this role should take (NASSP, 1991). It may be helpful to remember that the designation "principal" is derived from the term "principal teacher", indicating an instructional rather than administrative origin.

Overall, educational bodies in this province have given little thought to the formalization of expectations for the assistant principal's position. Official documents, such as the School's Act and various teacher collective agreements, fail to give guidance in this area. Neither the Department of Education nor the Avalon East School Board has issued documentation that officially outlines the responsibilities of the assistant principal. (S. Cardoulis, personal communication, July 14, 1999). However, a recent study sponsored and published by the Newfoundland and Labrador Teacher's Association (Sharpe & Harte, 1996) called *School administrator roles and responsibilities: Future needs and directions* does dedicate some attention to this subject. A small section of this study summarizes the perceptions held by principals and assistant principals with respect to the duties assistant principals currently perform and those that ought to be assigned to them.

Historical Background of the Assistant Principalship

In the United States, the position of assistant principal appeared during the 1920's when it became apparent that there was a need for additional administrative staff to run the school in the principal's absence (Wells, Nelson & Johnsen, 1965). However, in Newfoundland, the evolution of this supervisory position occurred much more slowly. The precursor to this position evolved as small community schools gave way to large regional and central schools in the centralization program of the 1950's. According to Rowe (1964) larger student populations created a need for additional administrative support, the result being a "supervising principal" whose primary duty was to supervise feeder schools. Rowe explains how the reorganization of the late 1960's reduced the number of school boards from several hundred to 35 and further consolidated community

schools. The “supervising principal” soon became the “co-ordinating principal” who was responsible for helping with the administration of two or more schools (Snow, 1981). The co-ordinating principal was responsible for his own school in addition to acting as co-ordinating principal for feeder schools within his school system. The co-ordinating principal often performed the antagonistic roles of coordinating principal, building principal, and teacher. These roles continued to conflict until developments at the district level resulted in the addition of supervisors, consultants and specialists who acquired many of the co-ordinating principal’s responsibilities. Until this time those schools without a building principal relied on lead teachers who spent a small part of the teaching day assigned to administrative duties (Rowe, 1964). These lead teachers performed duties we commonly associate with the “vice principal” or “assistant principal”. As school and school districts enlarged, their administrative staffs grew. The “co-ordinating principal” position disappeared and the positions of “principal” and “assistant principal” were firmly established.

The Schools Act (1997) outlined the duties of the school principal. With respect to the assistant principal the Act merely stated that the assistant principal was covered by the Act only when performing the duties of a principal. There was no further definition made as to the responsibilities of the assistant principal. Presumably, the assistant principal when performing duties other than those associated with the principal would fall under the regulations governing a classroom teacher.

Today there are very few schools employing a full time assistant principal. A full-time assistant principal is only possible where enrollment exceeds 1000 students or accommodations can be made in the master schedule to allow for the extra administration

time allocation (J. Delaney, personal communication, June 15, 1999). Due to the rural nature of education in Newfoundland many of this province's assistant principals perform administrative tasks in addition to regular teaching duties. In schools with less than 176 students and low staff numbers the assistant principal will often teach a full course load and complete administrative tasks outside class time.

The Vancouver School Board (Vancouver Elementary School Administrator's Association [VESAA], 1990) reported that in the British Columbia school system on average "vice principal time" is allocated at 44% administration duties and 56% teaching duties. However, approximately 50% of assistant principals surveyed were in favor of increasing the administration allocation to 75%. This finding is in agreement with a Toronto study (Edu-Con of Canada Inc., 1987) which reported that 50% of vice-principals and teachers desired increased administration time to allow for greater cooperation between vice-principals, staff and students.

The Administration Staffing Committee of the Vancouver Elementary School Administration Association recommended the following guidelines for allocation of vice-principal administration time:

Enrollment	Administration time allocation for the vice-principal
500+	100%
400-499	80%
300-399	60%
200-299	40%
Up to 199	50% with shared principal *

(VESAA, 1990, p 11-12)

* The principal maintains responsibility of two schools with a half-time vice-principal at each school.

Importance of Defining the Assistant Principalship

Kindervatter & Tosi (1971) contend that when the expectations of a position such as the assistant principalship are not clearly identified, the needs of the school and the administrator in that position can not be effectively fulfilled. They argue that the position and the administrator would better serve the educational system if expectations were flexible yet clearly expressed. In Newfoundland this is not the case as the roles and responsibilities of an assistant principal are dictated by a combination of tradition and the principal's prerogative. There is no government or school board document published to indicate otherwise. American researchers report that the principal establishes the assistant principal's role within an individual school and it is understood that the assistant principal will strive to successfully achieve the principal's expectations (Manatt, 1989). According to Gorton (1987) and Roderick (1986) assistant principals are not only qualified for leadership roles but desire stronger leadership roles within their schools. However, the principal's mandate often becomes a barrier to assistant principals' maximization of their potential for educational leadership.

VESAA (1990) reported the estimated time assistant principals and principals in their jurisdiction devoted to various administrative tasks. It was found that assistant principals spend more time than principals on tasks such as student management and budgeting, while principals tended to spend more of their time on tasks such as curriculum development, parent/community contacts, supervision and evaluation of teachers and student evaluation and placement. When asked where they would devote extra time if available, both principals and vice-principals placed an emphasis on curriculum development and supervision/evaluation of teaching staff. Vice-principals

were interested in having time to be more proactive in student management while principals were more interested in public relations and student evaluation and placement.

The Alberta School Trustee's Association (ASTA), in keeping with VESAA, recommended that the principal's role should be limited to primarily instructional and curricular supervision, program and professional development and public relations (Jesse, 1989). It was further suggested that the instructional leadership role should be allocated a full-time position.

The research in this area points to a definite need to define a continuum of responsibilities of the assistant principal that allow for flexibility coupled with a certain degree of direction. If this can be achieved, individuals in this position would gain a sense of direction and purpose, thereby benefiting their respective schools. It should be noted that while assistant principals have the same educational credentials as the principal, they frequently differ in the degree of administrative experience possessed.

The unsung role of the career assistant principal, a study undertaken by Marshall (1993), quotes a 56-year-old teacher/assistant principal who says "the best thing the principal does for an assistant is to define the job and then let him do it without petty interference". Marshall balances this individual's view by adding that other assistant principals welcomed the lack of job description since it is impossible to compose a comprehensive list of expectations that accurately describes the complexity of their daily experiences.

As early as 1973 Childress promoted the concept of an "administrative team" as the way of the future for educational leadership. As site-based management takes hold, educational leaders will realize that they need to rely on each other as never before.

Transformational strategies which foster the acceptance of group goals (Leithwood, 1993) and facilitative strategies which advance linear relationships among administration and staff (Lashway, 1999) are currently promoted as methods administrators can use to more effectively manage their schools. Successful educational leadership in the future will depend on the nurturing of a collegial atmosphere where the division of labor takes advantage of each administrator's strengths. Pellicier and Stevenson (1991) reiterate Childress when they maintain that the assistant principal is a critical constituent of a school's leadership team.

Reported Roles & Responsibilities of the Assistant Principal

According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 1991) the primary responsibilities of the assistant principal have historically been restricted to discipline and attendance. In Newfoundland, most assistant principals perform these responsibilities and other administrative tasks in addition to their instructional duties. Few schools in this province have full-time assistant principals and as a result, most assistant principal balance teaching duties, with discipline, student attendance, arranging substitutes, and evaluating teachers among many other tasks. Until recently, "the assistant principal was regarded as someone employed – if the school's enrollment justified it - to take some of the burden off the principal" (NASSP, 1991).

The literature cites four areas commonly considered the assistant principal's domain: managing student discipline, monitoring substitutes, providing curricular support materials and establishing duty rosters (Gorton & Kattman, 1985). Porter (1996) employs the phrase "daily operations chief" to describe the role of the assistant principal. Responsibilities of this position, according to Porter, include: "... attendance,

transportation, after school activities, PETs, food services, intramural sports, and teacher's evaluations ... computerizing the schools administrative functions such as report cards and the master schedule" (p. 25).

Discipline and attendance are the two duties most often associated with the assistant principal (Bates & Shank, 1983; Koru, 1993; Pellicier & Stevenson, 1991; Potter, 1980; Toth & Siemaszko, 1996), with discipline unanimously referred to as the single most time-consuming task performed by the assistant principal. According to Porter (1996), discipline requires considerable time and attention since the assistant principal must be able to justify his/her course of disciplinary action to parents and superiors.

A 1988 study conducted in Michigan surveyed 152 secondary school assistant principals to discern the degree of authority they possessed with respect to 65 administrative tasks (Staff, 1988). These assistant principals reported the following areas as being those in which they held the greatest authority: substituting for the principal, attendance, monitoring student behavior, discipline, consulting with parents regarding student misbehavior and rewarding positive behavior. This study, however, provided a very narrow view of the assistant principal's role, restricting it to primarily aspects of student attendance and discipline.

In an article called "Job description for the assistant principal", NASSP (1980) divided the duties of the assistant principal into five categories including administration, teaching personnel, student personnel, curriculum and external relations. More recently, in 1993, NASSP extended this description of the assistant principal's duties by adding that various organizational and maintenance tasks were also relevant to the position.

They state that, “ ... in performance of these tasks, he or she is constantly setting priorities and juggling activities designed to maintain the stability of the organization and the status quo of the school” (p. 67).

Often assistant principals are asked to divert their attention to miscellaneous tasks such as distributing textbooks and locks, assigning lockers, supervising the cafeteria, and organizing student extra-curricular and co-curricular activities, all of which could be easily relinquished to subordinate staff. For example, Koru (1993) and Panyako and Rorie (1987) all referred to building management as a responsibility of the assistant principal. Yet, trained maintenance personnel are more than qualified to make assessments and follow through on necessary repairs and maintenance. By performing such rudimentary tasks the assistant principal wastes valuable time that could be better spent engaged in more complex administrative pursuits (Hassenpflug, 1991).

Roderick's contribution to the literature in this area was to further broaden the assistant principal's role to include: supervision of busing, teacher-student mediation, assessment of achievement and consultation with guidance professionals (1986). Glant (1987) explains that the typical assistant principal is expected to handle a variety of tasks, activities and crisis on a daily basis. To illustrate this one assistant principal was quoted in Kelly (1999) as saying “as a school administrator, I was consistently shifting weight between the realities of available resources, district/board policy and expectations, contractual agreements with the needs and interests of teachers, support personnel and students in mind”.

An anonymous vice-principal from British Columbia writing in an on-line journal cited Lortie (“Who knew?”, 1999) who contrived the label “presentalism” to describe the

above plight. This first-year vice-principal explained that a school is a complex institution plagued by innumerable procedures and responsibilities that can overwhelm both administration and staff. The result is a lack of attention to long range personal and institutional goals and ultimately this will impede progress.

The NASSP's Council on the Assistant Principal (NASSP, 1991) in an attempt to organize these responsibilities, characterizes the role of the assistant principal as a combination of assigned, expected and assumed roles. Assigned roles are said to include those roles defined by the job description and direction from principal and school board. Expected roles are those dictated by tradition and expectations of stakeholders within the school. Assumed roles are defined as those roles the assistant principal chooses to take upon him/herself. It is this aspect of the assistant principal's role that provides for professional growth and personal satisfaction.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH COMPONENT

Roles and Responsibilities of the Assistant Principal

The goal of this internship was to gain administrative and leadership experience while participating in a mentoring relationship with a practicing assistant principal. I felt that theoretical study alone could not aid in the development of the skills and behaviours requisite of an effective leader. I chose the internship option as it provided an opportunity for experiential learning. Subsequent reflection on these experiences in conjunction with a solid foundation of theory helped me to explore and refine my own philosophy of educational leadership. While developing the essential leadership skills I was also able to meet most of the research goals I had set for myself. I now have an understanding of the complex roles played by the assistant principal in the dynamic culture of the junior high school.

For the research component on the internship I focused my observation on the particular roles and responsibilities a junior high school assistant principal performed over the course of the internship period. Since the school year is organized such that certain tasks occur at specific times of the year, I was restricted to observing only those tasks, roles and responsibilities that occurred from Feb 12, 1999 to June 23, 1999 at this particular school. The advent of a district wide reorganization initiative provided a disruption of the normal course of administrative processes during this period of time. In order to keep abreast of these developments the assistant principal agreed to extend the 10-week internship period. After the required 10 - week internship period I offered my

assistance for two to three hours daily to help the administrators cope with the many tasks assigned to them by the school board as a result of the reorganization plan.

One goal I was not able to fulfil was to be involved in scheduling and teacher allocations. Involvement in these two activities would have provided very important administrative experience, since they are responsibilities that all administrators must complete on a yearly basis. Unfortunately, this year, due to the disruption of reorganization these tasks were performed after the internship period had ended; I was therefore unable to participate.

Throughout my time at this junior high I used a daily journal to record my experiences and my personal reflections on these experiences. In addition I recorded questions and observations for which clarification was required. Initially, I intended to discuss these with the assistant principal on a weekly basis. However, as we developed rapport the process became less formal and after about a week we discussed any queries as they arose. A factor I had not anticipated was the “crisis” management aspect of the assistant principalship. There was rarely time available to schedule formal weekly meetings and, when plans were made, they were invariably thwarted by a wayward student, an irate parent or “urgent” school board business. While I recorded my impressions and reflected on them daily, I also tried to objectively record the types of activities that comprised a day in the life of the assistant principal at this school.

The National association of Secondary School Principals’ Council on the Assistant Principal (NASSP, 1991) in their pamphlet Restructuring the role of the assistant principal characterized the assistants principal’s role as a combination of “assigned”, “expected” and “assumed” tasks. I used these categories to structure my

reflections concerning the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal both during the research phase and in this report. “Assigned “ tasks are said to include those tasks that are defined by the job description and the direction set by the principal, school board and Department of Education. “Expected” tasks are those dictated by tradition and the expectations of the school’s stakeholders. “Assumed” tasks are defined as those tasks one chooses to take on. It is this category of tasks that provide for self-directed professional growth and personal satisfaction. Throughout the remainder of this report I will frequently refer to these categories in an attempt to relate my reflections in a systematic way.

Assigned Roles

As previously discussed, the roles and responsibilities officially assigned to the assistant principal are not specified by Avalon East School Board policy or government legislation. The School’s Act (1997) makes no reference to the roles of the assistant principal in school affairs. It does however list the responsibilities of the principal’s position. This list appears to encompass any person fulfilling the role of principal including the assistant principal or any other member of the administrative team. In most schools it is the principal who assigns tasks to the assistant principal and other members of the administrative team.

Discipline and Attendance

In this school the assistant principal is primarily responsible for discipline and attendance. However, in many respects the assistant principal and principal work closely as a team in these areas. These responsibilities can be categorized as both assigned and expected. As assigned tasks they are set by the principal; however, from the literature it

is apparent that discipline and attendance have traditionally been the domain of the assistant principal (NASSP, 1991).

At this school the assistant principal was the person responsible for dealing with immediate discipline problems as complaints came to the office from individual teachers. If students were sent out of class for misbehavior they would be directed to a waiting room attached to the office where they stayed until the assistant principal could speak with them. He would usually get an indication from the teacher as to the reason for the expulsion either by way of a note or a short explanation over the intercom. He then had the student come into his office where he tried to understand the student's side of the situation. If the situation was serious enough to warrant a suspension, the offending student was required to call a parent or guardian, explain the situation and arrange to be picked up immediately. This was the pattern of discipline for the most part; however, teachers generally dealt with lesser infractions themselves. Students exhibiting persistent behavior problems were generally placed on a tracking system whereby their teachers recorded their behavior in each class. This tracking sheet was checked at the office, photocopied by the principal and the students advised that they were to report for detention the next day. In general if a student received a behavior score of three or lower on the tracking sheet they were compelled to serve an after-school detention. The parent or guardian was to sign the sheet and return it to the school the next morning. In the morning the principal reviewed the tracking sheets along with any parental comments and added them to the student's behavior file. This course of action seemed to work quite well with most students since it was consistent and encouraged parental involvement in the discipline process. I found it interesting that the principal assumed the responsibility

of tracking these habitual discipline problems but left the more sporadic discipline problems to the assistant principal. It did however indicate to me that discipline was a shared responsibility at this school.

Attendance was the single highest consumer of the assistant principal's time comprising approximately 20% of the daily schedule. The school was on the WinSchool computer program for administration of attendance and student achievement reporting. Every morning he helped the secretary enter the morning's attendance and throughout the morning recorded any students who signed in or out. Each teacher had access to the same program in the classroom and could quickly check on any student missing from a particular class. One of the administrators, usually the principal, called the home of each absent student to make sure that the parent was aware of the child's absence. The benefits of this practice were two-fold: parents were less likely to let their child stay home without good reason and students were aware that their unexcused absence would not go unnoticed. This practice while time-consuming appeared to have a very positive effect on reducing student absenteeism.

Principal in Absentia

Another assigned responsibility was taking on the principal's role in the absence of the principal. At these times a senior department head was seconded to assist in the school's administration. The assistant principal at this school was obligated to replace the principal for a month while he underwent medical treatment in addition to his occasional absences for principal's meetings.

During the principal's extended absence, the administration team's focus remained primarily on maintaining the smooth running of the school's day to day

operations. The assistant principal's role shifted away from direct attention to immediate operational concerns towards a more general supervisory approach. Department heads, staff and support staff were depended on to adopt many of the tasks normally performed by the assistant principal. The department head took over much of the attendance tasks and dealt with many pressing discipline concerns, while substitutes were relied upon more heavily to carry out small administrative tasks and provide clerical support. The staff was reminded to direct only severe or persistent discipline problems to the administration's attention. These measures helped to reduce inefficiency in the office and allowed the assistant principal to attend to school board, parental and staff concerns.

During this period of time the assistant principal had much greater contact with individuals and agencies outside the school than he did in his role as assistant principal. The literature indicates that it is this aspect of administration along with vision building that provides the greatest job satisfaction in administration. In this case the emphasis was on maintaining stability not on instituting personal vision.

Member of the Administration Team

It is important to explain that leadership at this school was largely a team effort. This year the administrative team consisted of the principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor and resource/technology teacher. This team was loosely organized and members participated in or withdrew from decision making according to the issue under consideration. It would be impossible to handle all decisions through team consensus so frequently issues were discussed and the principal made the decision after hearing input from the other members of the team. Ultimately, the principal had veto power over the administration team; however, I did not witness an occasion when it was used. While all

members were forthright no one member of the team dominated. All members of the team respected each other's opinion and worked well together.

During my time at the school I did not observe any formal administration team meetings; instead, team members met informally for lunch on Fridays during which time concerns were voiced. The team appeared to be able to approach matters that arose professionally while maintaining an air of informality. I found this difficult from a research standpoint. Since I was not part of the group I was excluded from these informal meetings and was therefore not able to examine the dynamics of the group or take part in any of the team's planning sessions. I feel that I missed this segment of the school's "administrative culture". I believe that the team was not aware of the importance of their informal lunches in the administration of the school.

Expected Roles

It was my experience that most of the roles and responsibilities undertaken by the assistant principal were what Marshall (1991) describes in a NASSP pamphlet as "expected" roles. These refer to responsibilities defined by tradition or stakeholder expectations. Both traditions of the assistant principalship and the school itself have a bearing on the expectations placed on the assistant principal. The stakeholders of this school included members of the administration team, students, teaching staff, support staff, parents and guardians, volunteers, social services and community groups. All of these individuals maintained certain expectations of the school and its administration.

The assistant principal has been described, by Porter (1996), as the "daily operations chief". This is how many stakeholders view the assistant principal's position at this school. He is the individual they depend on to deal with their everyday concerns

and problems. Teachers looked to the assistant principal for support with respect to discipline, staff-student and staff-staff interactions. It was apparent that staff and students respected his direct, no-nonsense approach. There was never a question of where one stood, there were “no back doors”. His approach was very successful because he was fair and honest with the people he dealt with. It was obvious that the staff respected him as a colleague and a supervisor with seemingly little conflict between the two.

I expected that reconciling the roles of supervisor and colleague would be one of the most difficult tasks assistant principals must face as these two roles are so diametrically opposed. However, the assistant principal’s direct approach helped to delineate each of these roles. When a leader was required, he led; yet he knew how to relax and to adopt a collegial demeanor. I witnessed his deportment when meeting staff in an official capacity. He acted with understanding and patience yet maintained an air of confidence and authority. He always was able to get to the heart of the matter at hand and efficiently manage any difficulty.

He handled students and parents in much the same manner. In a number of encounters with students I noted that he effectively corrected unacceptable behavior while keeping the student’s dignity intact. Similarly in potentially explosive encounters with parents invariably the individuals left his office satisfied that the concerns expressed were validated and would be promptly addressed. I spent a great deal of time reflecting on his approach with people hoping to be able to duplicate his success in my own practice.

Academic Reporting

At this school tradition dictated that the assistant principal be responsible for coordinating student academic reports that were distributed three times throughout the year. The teachers were expected to enter the raw data into the computer with the assistance of the technology teacher, while the assistant principal prepared the final reports for printing and distribution. This task alone required over a week to complete. After the reports had been distributed it was the assistant principal who was responsible for coordinating parent-teacher interviews. He composed and distributed the appropriate communiqués to teachers who supplied them to the students to take home. He then collated the responses and organized an appointment schedule for each teacher. This process was extremely complex since some families had more than one student enrolled at the school and students had classes with many different teachers. Parents were restricted to 3 interviews per student since the time allowed to run the parent-teacher interviews was an afternoon and one evening. Through the process the assistant principal adopted the role of intermediary between administration, teachers and parents.

Co-ordination of Substitute Teachers

Often assigned to the assistant principal is the coordination of substitute staff. The teachers relied on the assistant principal to procure qualified, self-assured, dependable substitute teachers in their absence. This task also included the subsequent paperwork required to register the substitute for payment of services. It demanded he maintain an accurate record of substitute days, the teacher replaced, the substitute utilized, and the reason for the absence (medical or special leave request) and the length

of the absence. He also had to keep track of teacher absentees with medical certificates to ensure that they did not exceed the number of sick days allowed under the collective agreement. All this information was collected and reported to the Department of Education in the form of a monthly return.

This assistant principal had established a reliable contingent of substitute staff who were respected by students and staff. It was interesting to note his approach to the utilization of substitutes. He believed that they did not require a preparation period since the permanent teacher prepared the necessary lessons. Therefore any preparation time in their schedule should be utilized for the school's benefit. Regular substitutes were aware that they were expected to check in at the office whenever they had spare time so they could be directed to the area where they would be of most benefit. I had not observed this practice before but it is a creative way of making the most of available staff. However, I often wondered what the support staff's union representative would say about the practice.

Building Operations

The administration relied heavily on the knowledge and expertise of the school's caretaker and cleaning staff. A very conscientious individual, the caretaker made the everyday decisions concerning minor repairs and maintenance. Where larger monetary investment was required the administration reviewed the pertinent details and initiated an appropriate response. Most final decisions were referred to the principal; however, the assistant principal tended to be the individual first approached to deal with building concerns. In approximately 10% of the studies reviewed for this report the assistant principal accepted full-or partial responsibility for building operations.

Staff Supervision

Supervision is in many schools a shared task. At this particular school the assistant principal is solely responsible for the supervision and assessment of teaching staff. While I was at the school the assistant principal was in the process of supervising two teachers. These teachers were both on a tenure track and the summative evaluation filed by the assistant principal would assure or delay the realization of tenure. The third teacher was under a short-term contract and the assessment given by the assistant principal would have an impact on his ability to secure future contracts with the school board. In all these cases there was no evidence of a formative evaluation process. It should be noted that I was only present for the final stages of the evaluation process. I sat in on the post-conference for one of the teachers. The atmosphere was informal and comfortable. The assistant principal reviewed his comments on the evaluation form and the teacher signed it. There were no concerns raised by either the teacher or assistant principal. In fact, in all three cases the evaluations were positive. The assistant principal later informed me that in the past he found it necessary to discipline a teacher. However this was accomplished officially only after numerous conferences with the teacher in question and an attempt made to help the teacher rectify the problem. He stressed the need to maintain detailed records documenting any problems that occurred and failed attempts to deal with those problems.

Staff Engagement and Allocation

As the administrator who works most closely with the teaching staff it is essential that the assistant principal have an impact on the acquisition and assignment of new staff members. I was not at the school when these decisions were made. However it is my

understanding that the assistant principal was involved in both processes. It was stressed that in this area the administration also worked as a team to obtain a harmonious and competent teaching staff.

Assumed Roles

The NASSP Council on the Assistant Principal (NASSP, 1991) describes assumed roles as those that are adopted voluntarily. The motivation given for the adoption of tasks above and beyond those assigned and expected is personal satisfaction and professional growth. I would add a third reason some assistant principals take on many essential roles is that there is no one else available to do the job. Therefore they must be flexible enough to fill in as needed. Two roles I observed the assistant principal assume over the course of my internship were student monitor and clerical assistant. Neither of these provided professional growth though student monitoring did provide some degree of personal satisfaction. Instead they provided a proactive way to keep the school operating smoothly, thus making the assistant principal's job easier over the long term.

Flexibility is a definite requirement of the assistant principalship. The assistant principal must be able to assume a variety of roles as the situation dictates. Many responsibilities are not formally assigned at the outset of the assistant principal's tenure but rather are assigned as the need arises. For example, when a teacher was indisposed, the assistant principal filled in until a substitute was available. When the secretary was overwhelmed with work, the assistant principal helped by entering attendance data or photocopying memos. When the guidance counselor was away at a meeting the assistant

principal soothed a distraught student. When the principal was absent, the assistant principal stepped into his position.

Student Supervision

This assistant principal did cafeteria duty every day for the first 20 minutes of the lunch period. This made him visible to the students and allowed him to become acquainted with them outside his role as a disciplinarian. He confided that he felt it important to develop a rapport with the students and since he did not have a teaching assignment this was his way of achieving that rapport. It also helped to foster a collegial atmosphere between the administration and staff. He felt it helped to boost morale among the teachers because it allowed them 20 minutes to relax and eat lunch in peace before they had to face the student body for the afternoon session. The teachers appreciated his effort, noting that it showed them that he was sensitive to their needs. While this role did provide some personal satisfaction I believe his main goal was to be proactive in the assistant principalship.

Communications

The assistant principal shouldered most of the responsibility for the maintenance of open communication between the administration and staff, students and parents. On a daily basis communiqués were composed, typed, duplicated and distributed by this assistant principal. I would expect that an assistant principal would compose communiqués but I was very surprised to note just how much of the clerical work he was forced to shoulder. I find it rather disturbing that an assistant principal's valuable time would be spent in this way when an experienced secretary could be hired at less than half the assistant principal's salary. I was informed that there was a part-time secretary

working at the school the previous year but this position was made redundant presumably due to budgetary constraints. The assistant principal had no choice but to help where he could if the school was to continue to run smoothly. This is a clear example of the flexibility requisite of the position. On reflection I questioned the priorities that would take time away from instructional and administrative supervision to devote to clerical tasks. I realize that the clerical tasks are essential to the running of the school but should the assistant principal be the one seconded to do it. It concerns me that important administration and instruction-related tasks are preempted in favor of more immediate tangible tasks when all the latest literature on educational leadership espouses the importance of instructional leadership.

It seems a grievous waste of human resources to have potential instructional leaders relegated to purely administrative tasks when they could be partners in the creation of vision within their schools. A school board taking this narrow view is doomed to lose in the long-term as important instructional improvements are supplanted by more unrelenting operational needs. It will find that overwork, frustration and unsatisfying roles that under-utilize administrators' knowledge and experience will result in administrative burnout.

Critical Reflections

Recommendations for the Evolution of the Assistant Principalship

As a result of this internship examining the role of the assistant junior high principal the following recommendations are put forth:

1. Reduce fragmentation of the administrator's time due to the many diverse issues they must confront daily. By streamlining the workload and reducing the crisis response nature of the administrative position much of the frustration and stress experienced by administrators, especially assistant principals, can be alleviated.
2. Make funds available to hire sufficient clerical and support staff to ensure the smooth running of the school, thereby releasing the assistant principal to attend to situations commensurate with his or her expertise and educational background.
3. Ensure that the assistant principal's position not be a dumping ground for all the undesirable administrative tasks of the school. It is imperative that the assistant principal be an active and equal member of the administrative team if satisfaction is to be derived from the position and the individual is to bring excellence to the position.
4. It is important to keep an assistant principal relatively free of instructional duties. While it is imperative for the administrator to remain in touch with instructional issues it is also important to ensure that the crisis aspect of the position does not adversely affect students. A part-time assistant principal's frequent unavoidable absences from the classroom can have detrimental effects on achievement.

Therefore steps must be taken to reduce the need for a teaching assistant principal to be interrupted during instructional time.

5. It would be wise to begin to view the assistant principal's position as a unique career choice rather than merely a necessary precursor to the principalship. This change may help to reduce the turnover rate within this position and will enhance the stability of leadership in schools. It may also have the added benefit of attracting individuals who may be interested in leadership but not advancement to the principalship.
6. Support research into the unique leadership experiences of the assistant principal and how these experiences influence the quality and efficiency of leadership in schools.
7. Modify university administrative preparatory programs to reflect the realities of school administration keeping in mind both managerial and supervisory aspects. It is also important for preparatory program providers to emphasize the very different leadership skills required by leaders at different levels of the hierarchy. It should be noted that experiences in lower levels of the hierarchy do not necessarily prepare individuals for the roles they will have to play at higher levels. This distinction must be advanced and discussed by fledgling administrators.
8. Reassign non-instructional services currently undertaken by the school to other community-based agencies as much as possible. Such agencies are much better equipped to provide these services and have access to experts in the area. Schools cannot continue to provide non-instructional services to the detriment of

educational goals. Schools have expertise in education and that is where the primary focus must stay.

Conclusion

The internship experience was invaluable to my advancement in the field of educational administration. It allowed me to observe and participate in the administrative activities of the assistant principal in a junior high school and to become aware of the rewards and challenges of this particular administrative position.

The limited literature in this area demonstrates that while specific time allocations vary widely from school to school the typical assistant principal devotes a majority of the working day to attendance and disciplinary concerns. My experiences at this school were congruent with those findings.

In addition to the pivotal activities of attendance and discipline this assistant principal was also required to attend to a variety of other administrative tasks related to teacher and student supervision, academic reporting, building operations and home-school communications. The literature indicates that it is common for the assistant principal to maintain responsibility for a wide range of administrative tasks. However, it does point out that the scope and depth of responsibility carried by an assistant principal is school specific.

Through this internship I became aware of a number of concerns related to this position namely job satisfaction, role conflict, efficiency and emphasis on management rather than instruction. These concerns have been raised and discussed in the most recent educational administration literature. Slowly researchers are realizing that the assistant principalship is a unique role that cannot continue to be viewed as merely an extension of

the principalship. My recommendations reflect some of the conclusions I came to as a result of the internship experience and related discussions in the research literature.

A strong case has been made by researchers such as Lashway (1997), Sergiovanni (1996) and Williams (1997) for the development of shared leadership rather than top down leadership models. These individuals assert that such a shift in focus could help to improve efficiency and job satisfaction, reduce role conflicts and shift the emphasis from managerial to instructional goals.

There is no doubt that further research and discussion is necessary if we are to truly understand the unique and valuable contribution the assistant principal makes to the attainment of educational goals.

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